

## Brothers in Science

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Summary: Originally created for a Portal kinkmeme prompt, now brought here. Aperture is gone, but the lone survivor has made his way out. Doug makes his way to one of the last strongholds of human civilization, where Gordon is encamped.

## Brothers in Science

\_This was originally created in half a day as a response to a prompt post on the Portal kinkmeme, which asked for Doug Rattmann to meet Gordon Freeman from Half Life. I thought I'd post my work up here as well. It's just a simple oneshot.\_

Everything was gone.

Perhaps he had been foolish to think the world would have remained the same even as Aperture decayed and was remade. The same buildings would be standing, the old coffee shop would be in business, and the apartment he'd rented before being forced to use employee quarters would be rented by a new tenant.

However, Aperture's meltdown had been internalized. Like an implosion, it vanished off the face of the map and curled in on itself. A piece of paper lit by a match, curling inwards and shriveling into a crumpled and grey version of itself that dissolved when a finger brushed it. She had concentrated on testing after the lockdown, and never even concerned herself with what was outside their underground hole. Or had she? \_I'm the only thing standing between us and them.\_ The voice had crackled between her first screams of pain, when the facility shook in second-hand fury and desperation.

She lied. She had lied all the time, to further her goals, when she was scared, and when she had the upper hand. Before her, humans had been the only creatures who could tell untruths. What did that make this world? They all lied to others, and the brain itself told falsehoods to his neural pathways.

He still should have listened. It might have prepared him for the devastation beyond.

Cube's storage area was well-stocked with beans and water, along with what few paints he'd been able to fit in. It weighed him down and limited his movements, but Doug knew he wouldn't last long without the provisions. It was better to be slow than dead. Whatever wheat grains he could pluck in the field went in his pockets, so he could later find a way to eat them. The sole comfort was that Chell was nowhere to be seen. At night he was tormented with visions of her lying dead on the ground, skeletally thin and stretched out as if trying to move on even in the afterlife. The fact that there was no corpse was small comfort, but he'd take what he could.

When he reached the first town he'd expected... not a hero's welcome, surely, but at least people. The buildings were bombed, and holes seared through buildings by some unknown power. The cracked road thumped against his feet as he glanced around, noting that there were no visible signs of resistance. There were no sandbags, no boarded windows, and no barricades. It had swept through the town like a storm, not even leaving bodies behind. Another relief. He'd had enough of those for a lifetime.

He had tried to scavenge, but there was little left in the town. It had been ravaged long ago, and the weeds were almost finished reclaiming their territory. A couple bottles of water, placed in his worn pants pockets, and that was all. The former scientist walked onward. There was little hope that he'd meet any humans now, but he had to move on. If the next city was empty he would need a back-up plan.

By the time he'd walked to the city (he couldn't even remember its name now; Aperture had consumed his memories like a bloated leach), his supplies had dwindled to a single can and those two bottles of water. Doug was lean and tanned, loping along and occasionally muttering to Cube. He'd burned when he'd first stepped outside, his translucent skin becoming pink and peeling in long strips. At least he didn't care about cancer now.

He didn't have to worry about becoming mute, either, or forgetting how to talk. His conversations with Cube gave him at least his own companion to converse with, though he never bothered with the other voices in his head. Why should he? They all gave him the same advice they had for years: Go kill yourself, just end it all and rest like you've been wanting. The thought was tempting enough without him, but he needed to cling on to his hope. Chell had never given up, and he needed to be worthy of her.

Dilapidated buildings clustered around what seemed like an onyx tower in the distance, with none but the tower being higher than, say, seven stories. He'd never seen anything like it, not in this part of the United States. From the sun Doug had gotten his bearings, steadily traveling at a southeastern angle from the ruins of Aperture Laboratories. How many days had he traveled now? Over a few weeks, certainly. He knew the rate at which he consumed food, and at least aboveground he knew about night and day. The world held less wonder than it had at the beginning of his trip, but he was at least glad to be away from the stale and timeless facility. The sterility and decay were not something he wanted to witness again. Even the bugs in the

grass were preferable to nothing alive but himself and his mind.

Perhaps there had been some sort of nuclear war, he thought carefully as he trudged onward toward the city. If that was the case then Doug probably shouldn't have explored the other town. Everything could be irradiated. But then they'd settled in the bigger ruins and built... something. That tower seemed off in a way he couldn't describe, impossibly tall among the squat buildings, well-made out of something black that gave a faint sheen. Maybe it was technology, though he couldn't imagine that having improved after the end of the world.

It was with a start that he noticed something moving in the nearest building, a ramshackle outlier with a tin roof and taped windows. Something -or someone- was in there. He'd been fortunate enough not to encounter any animals on his route, though upon reflection they would have been wiped out even more easily than the humans. Despite that, he'd heard strange noises at night, noises that didn't sound like any animal in the world. Certainly enough to make him wonder if there had been mutations.

In any case, whatever it was flashed across the window and then opened the door. A human, thank God. And one that didn't look mutated or crazy. His clothes were worn and were obviously meant as protection, from the bulletproof vest to the steel-toed boots. It was fall, wasn't it? Doug was used to being chilled, and the world above was at least slightly warmer than the icy laboratories. He glanced at the knit cap, then at the pistol he held easily.

"Stay where you are." The thin man halted immediately, hand moving to steady the strap that secured Cube to his spine. This person didn't seem to see him as a threat. Perhaps it was a security procedure. "Keep your hands where I can see them. Where are you from?"

Oh, good. The hard questions first. "I'm from Michigan." His faintly hoarse voice was clear enough, he thought, and slow so he wouldn't stutter from nervousness. "Have you heard of Aperture Laboratories? I... used to work there. It's gone, though."

"Haven't heard of it." The man gave him a perfunctory once-over with his eyes, probably analyzing the ancient lab coat and tattered appearance. "Though if it's anything like Black Mesa, maybe that's a good thing. Why are you here?"

"I stumbled upon this place. It's hardly easy to miss. Where are we?" The lambda symbol was spray-painted in yellow on an armband, and it intrigued him. Where had he seen something use that letter before? It seemed to mean something about him, like a squadron symbol, perhaps.

"City Three," he rejoined with a questioning look. "If you were wandering then you're in luck. It's one of the biggest cities now, after what happened. We've even got Freeman here, back from his trip. We're about a thousand miles away from Ground Zero, which got nuked, and are still the nearest city left. Luckily, the land around here isn't irradiated and we have our big man here. It's the closest he could be to his old work place."

Now there were even bigger questions, but he could wait until he had provisions and shelter. "I've been... out of the loop. For a long

time. If there's any way I can come in and get something to eat and a place to sleep, I won't be a bother." That was reasonable enough. "I'll even leave as soon as you tell me to go," he added.

"Why would I do that? We could use all the humans we can find. If you've got a specialty we'll put you to work, and if you don't we'll find something that's useful for you." He grinned knowingly at the scientist. "Don't know how you could miss the Seven-Hour War and everything unless you've been in a hole in the ground for about forty years, but I'm not gonna comment."

Oh, if only he knew. However, he wasn't in the mood for jokes. "Doctor Doug Rattmann, then, at City Three's service," he stated quietly. "And before you ask, I'm not a medical doctor. The only wounds I've patched up were on myself."

"Oh, one of those educated folks? Kyle Marks, Resistance member. I man this post for people like you to join the flock." After a second he glanced back at the house. "Lemme get my radio, okay? I'll call in and tell someone to pick you up. Stay right here." He shoved the gun back into a pocket, trotting toward the shack and leaving the door open.

Doug took a few steps closer, brushing uneven hair out of his eyes and behind his ears so he could listen better. "West Outpost to Home. I've got a new guy here." He paused, listening to the staticky voice on the other end squawk and stutter out a question. "Neither. One of those strange people you get who've never even heard about the war. Claims he's from Aperture Laboratories, wherever that is." A hiss of static greeted him, then loud and unintelligible questions.

"Woah, hold on! I can only hear one of you at a time. That's what he said, he's some sort of doctor. Not a med guy. Rat... Rat man, that's his name. He apparently wandered down here and found us with a grody lab coat and a box with hearts on his back." More questions followed, so quick that Doug wondered how he could understand the people at the other end. "Yeah, I'll bring him in. Pronto. ... All the way up? To Freeman? Don't joke, Hal, it doesn't suit you. Okay, okay, I'm going."

He stepped back, just in time for the man to exit the building with a wave. "Turns out you get to meet the big folks right off! Are you some kind of scientist?" Marks was certainly watching him with more respect, he noticed, and he was jittery. "Let's go, they want you at the hub ay-sap." Turning, he walked briskly down the road and toward the inner part of the city. Doug followed at a painful trot, with every blister reminding him of their existence. What was going on? Aperture was a big name, or had been before its decline, but he didn't see why it would matter after the apocalypse.

City Three had the preparations he'd expected in the first town, with boarded windows, chain-link fences, and guards. Plenty of houses were patched up with wood or some sort of makeshift concrete with plenty of pebbles. He could only assume people had flocked to be closer together after the event, and formed giant colonies. Some people had plain, dusty blue jumpsuits that for a moment reminded him of Aperture. They walked with purpose, but carried no guns. Others, like Marks, seemed to be more of a law-keeping force. The main thing that didn't change for them was the yellow symbol on their sleeves, but they all had the same expression in their eyes as he glanced at them.

They were worn out, but happy.

"Only a few of these places have been freed from the Combine, so you're lucky you found the only good city in America." The man strode quickly in front of him, glancing back like a tour guide. "Freeman helped us kick their asses about a month ago, and is probably staying for a little while longer. I think he wants to be near where Black Mesa was, personally." He found himself nodding absently, even though he listened with rapt attention. "Hey, we're here."

They'd approached the tower. From this close, it looked almost like obsidian as the light reflected off of it. Certainly not human. Perhaps it had been these Combine the man had talked about. "Carry on up the stairs and they'll find you. I've got to get back to my post." With a longing look at the tower, he turned and trotted back the way they had come.

Doug approached nervously, opening the door and tilting his head upwards. The stairs were in the front, with oddly-shaped rooms on either side. He took a deep breath then began to climb while gripping the rail. By the end they'd have to carry him down in a basket, he thought ruefully. The next floor seemed to hold sleeping quarters and upright, empty pods. However, the third floor made him pause. There were plenty of machines in the large, open floor of the tower, and charging stations hung on the walls. Code flashed on screens and he leaned in, attempting to read. This was like Aperture, only not in a dinky little office.

"I see you've come just in time," came a croaky voice from behind. He yelped and whirled, stepping backwards as his mind noted the presence of an aging scientist. The white hair and thick glasses only reinforced what the lab coat told him, and he tensed. "Doctor Kleiner. And you are?"

"Doctor Rattmann," his mouth supplied before his brain could catch up and warn him. He took another step back, clasping his hands behind his back.

"And from Aperture. Wonderful!" His voice squeaked when he was excited, Doug noted as Kleiner rubbed his hands together. "I have so many experiments you need to see and give input on. It's so rare to find someone with your talents, and rarer still to find an Aperture survivor. Our other one didn't have your special education, but she seems happier in the military section in any case."

His mouth went dry, the moisture transferring to his suddenly sweaty palms. "You've found... another? A w-woman?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Gordon wants to meet you." He took one bony arm in hand, steering Doug toward the back. He had to resist the urge to pull away at the touch like a wild animal. "He's over here waiting for Alyx. They've been working so hard to get the city running on its own." Sympathetic now, he noted. This scientist was quite a soft character to have survived a war. However, as they approached the two figures Doug straightened his spine. Cube's increased weight didn't bother him while he surveyed the larger figure in the orange and grey suit. That was an H.E.V. suit. They'd... studied one of those at Aperture, for purely hypothetical motivations. The man in the suit turned to them and he blinked. The face was certainly scholarly at first glance, if one squinted.

However, his eyes showed deep thought, quiet amusement, and determination. The latter was what he'd seen in Chell's eyes every time he'd been lucky enough to catch a glimpse of her. This Gordon handled himself confidently, expecting to be obeyed and ready to do what needed to be done.

"Gordon, this is Doctor Rattmann from Aperture Science. Doctor Rattmann, may I present Doctor Gordon Freeman from Black Mesa?"

The handshake was firm, his thin and dirty fingers meeting the gloved hand. Each stared at the other, sizing him up in silence. Green eyes met blue, noting the mismatched pupils. Though unkempt and tattered, he stood tall and determined. The tattered coat hung like a cloak of war, in stark contrast to the crisp lab coat worn by the man behind him. Even the Cube on his back didn't seem odd in the hush that hung between the staring men.

Gordon smiled first, tilting his head faintly and shaking the hand again. Doug relaxed faintly, returning the small acknowledgement. No words needed to be said between them. Explanations were needed, of course, but there would be no proving necessary.

Kleiner turned at Alyx's tap on his shoulder from behind, grinning broadly. "I know they'll be the best of friends," he whispered proudly at her querying eyebrow.

End  
file.